

3/30/22 Wednesday

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Disney Executive Calls for 'Many, Many' LGBTQ Characters in Future Films

Disney recently jumped into Florida politics by vowing to help repeal a new law nicknamed "Don't Say Gay" by its critics, although the corporate media giant was revealed to have donated to the campaigns of every lawmaker who sponsored the bill.

Speaking on a company-wide Zoom call on Monday that [was later made public](#), Karey Burke, president of Disney's General Entertainment Content, said she supports "many, many" LGBTQ characters being included in future films produced by the company.

"I'm here as a mother of two queer children, actually," Burke told coworkers. "One transgender child and one pansexual child, and also as a leader."

The call was part of the "Reimagine Tomorrow" campaign, an effort "to establish inclusion standards across all Disney General Entertainment content," [the website says](#). Among their goals is to reach a threshold of 50% of characters in scripted Disney media coming from underrepresented groups, including women, LGBTQ people, disabled people, veterans, and nonwhite people.

Disney has been criticized in recent years for claiming to be introducing LGBTQ characters in its films, but doing so in a ["blink-and-you'll-miss-it"](#) way.

Last year, GLAAD's annual ["Studio Responsibility Index"](#) found that 22.7% of all US film releases had LGBTQ characters, although noting that because of the COVID-19 pandemic, only a tiny fraction of the typical number of films for a given year were actually released. However, half of those characters got at least 10 minutes of screentime - a significant increase from the previous year, when none got more than 3 minutes on-screen.

Burke said on the call that she was dismayed to learn that Disney products only have a "handful" of LGBTQ lead characters.

"And I realized it actually is true. We have many, many, many LGBTQIA characters in our stories and yet we don't have enough leads and narratives in which gay characters just get to be characters and not have to be about gay stories," she added.

A poll [published last month by Gallup](#) found that 7.1% of American adults identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ), although another 6.6% had no opinion about whether they were straight or LGBTQ. The percentage among Generation Z is even higher, with 20.8% of those born between 1997 and 2003 identifying as LGBTQ.

While Disney's policy of increased LGBTQ inclusivity is nothing new, the company has recently waded into the political spotlight by [criticizing Florida's HB 1557](#), the "Parental Rights in Education" act, better known as "Don't Say Gay." Governor Ron DeSantis signed the bill into law earlier this week, banning the teaching of LGBTQ topics in schools to children between kindergarten and third grade. Disney [pledged on Monday](#) to support the law's repeal.

Initially, the company hesitated to condemn the bill, despite having spoken out against other anti-LGBTQ bills in the past. Critics pointed out that [Disney had donated to](#) the campaigns of

every single Florida lawmaker who sponsored HB 1557 - a situation the [company said it would reexamine](#) after bowing to public pressure and coming out against the bill.

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'Still Need More': NATO's No. 2 General Says Alliance Needs to Beef Up Eastern Europe Deployment

In response to Russia's special operation in Ukraine, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) doubled its battle groups in Eastern Europe last week to eight, sending the four new groups to southeastern members of the alliance.

Testifying before Congress on Wednesday, US Air Force Gen. Tod Wolters, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) and NATO's second-highest-ranking general, said the alliance will likely need to increase its deployments in Eastern Europe, which the alliance commonly calls its "Eastern Flank."

"What we need to do from a US force perspective is look at what takes place in Europe following the completion of the Ukraine-Russia scenario and examine the European contributions, and based off the breadth and depth of the European contributions, be prepared to adjust the US contributions," [Wolters told the Senate](#) Armed Services Committee.

"Obviously, there's always a mix between the requirement of permanent versus rotational, and there are pluses and minuses of each one," he added. "We'll have to continue to examine the European contributions to make a smart decision about where to go in the future."

The US has rushed thousands of troops to Europe since late February, when Russia launched a special operation in Ukraine aimed at neutralizing the country's military and rendering it unable to become a forward position from which NATO could attack Russia. While the alliance has declined to defend Ukraine, which is not yet a member, it has vowed to defend the territory of its members, several of which border Ukraine.

Wolters revealed the scale of that escalation on Tuesday, telling lawmakers that the US troops under his command had increased from 60,000 to 102,000. By comparison, at the end of the Cold War the US had 305,000 troops in Europe, most of which were deployed in West Germany, [according to Pentagon](#) records.

That total comes as NATO [doubled its Enhanced Forward Presence](#) deployment to Eastern Europe last week, sending four new battle groups to Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. The other four battle groups [were already deployed](#) in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia; together the eight battalion-sized units consist of roughly 10,000 troops.

As per a [1997 agreement with Russia](#), NATO is barred from "permanent stationing of substantial combat forces" on its Eastern Flank. However, the alliance maintains its garrisons there via the legal fiction of ["rotational deployments."](#)

NATO's eastward expansion has been a major foreign policy concern of the Russian Federation since the end of the Cold War. The alliance was formed in 1949 by several Western European capitalist states who banded together to jointly resist either a Soviet invasion or a socialist revolution in one of their own countries. Although it claimed to be an alliance in defense of

democracies, from the beginning that claim was made farcical by the inclusion of Portugal, which was ruled by the Estado Novo dictatorship of Antonio Salazar.

The socialist states of Eastern Europe, led by the Soviet Union, formed the Warsaw Pact in 1955 to counter NATO once it added a remilitarized West Germany to its membership. However, the Warsaw Pact was abolished in 1991 when the socialist republics were overthrown and Western-friendly capitalist governments came to power. The Soviet Union also dissolved itself, splintering into 15 republics, including the legal successor state of the Russian Federation. [NATO leaders pledged](#) not to expand the alliance further east, but that promise was short-lived, and in 1999, former Warsaw Pact members Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary were admitted to NATO.

NATO again expanded eastward in the 2000s, when Romania, Bulgaria, several former Yugoslav republics, and the Baltic States joined; the latter were considered particularly provocative, as they had previously been part of the USSR itself. Ukraine and Georgia, two other former Soviet Republics, have also grown increasingly close to NATO and after the 2014 US-backed coup in Kiev, the new Ukrainian government [made the goal of joining NATO](#) a priority and even added it [to the Ukrainian Constitution](#) in 2019.

In recent negotiations to end the Russian operation, [Kiev has signaled it is willing](#) to give up its NATO membership ambitions and become a politically neutral state.

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Arizona Gov. Signs Bills Banning Abortion After 15 Weeks & Gender-Affirming Treatment For Youth

Bills restricting abortion rights and LGBTQ rights have proliferated in recent years, in many cases being sponsored by the same conservative lawmakers.

On Wednesday, Arizona Governor Doug Ducey signed three bills into law that heavily restrict abortion procedures, outlaw gender-affirming hormone treatment and sex-reassignment surgeries for kids and also ban transgender youth from competing on girls' sports teams. The bills signed were SB 1138; which bans medical professionals from providing transition procedures to children under the age of 18, including puberty blockers, hormone therapy, and gender affirmation surgery; SB 1165; which bans trans girls from kindergarten through 12th grade from playing on girls' sports teams; and SB 1164, which bans abortions after the 15th week of pregnancy.

In a [Wednesday statement](#), Ducey said the two bills are "common-sense and narrowly-targeted to address these two specific issues — while ensuring that transgender individuals continue to receive the same dignity, respect and kindness as every individual in our society." He added that by signing SB 1164, he had "affirmed Arizona's commitment to protecting the lives of preborn children."

The bills have aroused outrage from supporters of women's rights and LGBTQ rights.

"We ALL deserve to thrive, but these bills attack the wellbeing of many Arizonans – especially those who are already marginalized," the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Arizona [said about the trio](#) of bills.

"SB 1138 is a cruel and potentially life-threatening bill that would harm transgender youth for whom gender-affirming services are medically necessary. The American Academy of Pediatrics and the nation's [other leading medical and mental health professionals](#) oppose this legislation, which interferes with their ability to provide best-practice, often life-saving care," said the [Human Rights Campaign](#), a nationwide LGBTQ rights advocacy group.

"These are just kids, and they just want to play" sports, Jennifer Brown, a mother of a transgender daughter, [told Arizona's Public Broadcasting](#) outlet. "This isn't about scholarships, this isn't about big money. This is about kids trying to be part of a team and trying to be as normal as humanly possible."

Arizona Democratic Senator Kyrsten Sinema, who is the only openly bisexual member of the US Senate, has not commented on the bills.

Arizona follows a [nationwide trend](#) in passing all three bills, as other conservative-dominated states have passed similar laws [concerning abortion](#) and trans athletes in recent months. However, the Republican [governors of Utah and Indiana](#) bucked that trend last week, vetoing trans athlete bans in their respective states.

The US [Supreme Court heard arguments](#) about several abortion-restricting laws late last year, including a 15-week ban in Mississippi and a six-week ban in Texas, which is considered the nation's most restrictive. Their rulings are expected before the end of the summer and could impact the court's 1973 ruling in Roe vs. Wade, which legalized abortion in the US.

LGBTQ rights activists argue that a 2020 Supreme Court ruling that [banned employment discrimination](#) against LGBTQ workers carries widespread implications that ban other forms of anti-LGBTQ discrimination as well, which the Biden administration has affirmed. In June 2021, the US Department of Justice [filed statements of interest](#) in lawsuits in West Virginia and Arkansas, saying that bans on trans athletes and trans youth healthcare are unconstitutional.

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US, Philippines Kick Off 'Largest-Ever' War Games Year After Duterte Backed Off Alliance Cancellation

Since 2015, the size of the Balikatan drills has steadily decreased, as Manila has cozied up to China, the most likely adversary for the US and Philippines to rehearse military action against. In 2021, just 640 troops participated, in part due to COVID-19 restrictions.

On Monday, the Philippines and United States kicked off 12 days of joint military drills in which roughly 9,000 troops will rehearse defending the archipelago against foreign attack - a thinly veiled reference to China.

Called Balikatan, the drills are the "largest-ever iteration of the Philippine-led annual exercise," [according to a news release](#) by US Indo-Pacific Command.

“During Balikatan, the US military and AFP [Armed Forces of the Philippines] will train together to expand and advance shared tactics, techniques, and procedures that strengthen our response capabilities and readiness for real-world challenges,” Maj. Gen. Jay Barger, 3rd Marine Division Commanding General, said in the release. “The friendship and trust between our forces will enable us to accomplish any mission across the spectrum of military operations.” However, that “friendship” was on the rocks for several years until last summer, when Philippine President [Rodrigo Duterte fully restored](#) the Visiting Forces Agreement that allows US troops to be stationed in the archipelago, after having threatened to shred it. A former colony of the United States, the Philippines has had a mutual defense treaty with the US since 1951, four years after it was granted independence.

The drills will last until April 8 and involve exercises in maritime security, amphibious operations, live-fire training, urban operations, aviation operations, counterterrorism, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, the Pentagon said.

Rafael Zagala, a spokesperson for the Philippine military, told the [South China Morning Post](#) (SCMP) on Wednesday that this year’s drills marked a shift in Manila’s focus from fighting insurrections by communist militias and Muslim fundamentalists to facing down foreign foes. “Since insurgency is coming to a close, the whole armed forces will transition to external defense,” he said.

While not named directly, there is really only one country they have in mind: the People’s Republic of China. Manila and Beijing [have sparred repeatedly](#) in recent years over control of several small islands in the South China Sea, which sits to the west of the Philippines. Manila has carefully balanced its relations with Washington and China as each side tries to woo the country of 109 million into close cooperation. Earlier this month, the US and the Philippines [signed a deal on strategic](#) civil nuclear cooperation, in which the US will help develop Philippine nuclear power infrastructure.

When it comes to the South China Sea dispute, the US has tried to promote a military showdown as the only solution, but China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which includes the Philippines, have [worked toward completing](#) a Code of Conduct for the waterway that would govern interactions at sea.

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US Consumer Inflation Up 6.4% in Year to February From 6% in January - Commerce Dept.
(Adds details, context in paras 3-8)

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The Personal Consumption Expenditure Index, a US inflation indicator closely followed by the Federal Reserve, grew 6.4% in the year to February, keeping to its fastest expansion in four decades, data from the Commerce Department showed on Thursday.

The PCE Index rose by a revised 6% in the 12 months to January after a 5.8% growth in the year to December. All three readings indicated the fastest growth since 1982.

The PCE Index is being closely watched by the Fed to determine the pace at which it should raise interest rates to counter US soaring inflation in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic.

The Fed slashed US interest rates to nearly zero after the COVID outbreak in March 2020 and kept them there to enable economic recovery.

The economy did grow — by 5.7% in 2021, the fastest since 1982, after a 3.5% COVID-induced contraction in 2020.

But inflation grew just as fast, as the PCE Index and other price gauges showed. The Fed's typical tolerance for inflation is a mere 2% per year.

This month, for the first time since the outbreak of the pandemic, the central bank's policy-making Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) raised rates by 25 basis points. But unyielding inflation is prodding various FOMC officials to consider a 50-basis point increase at the committee's next two meetings in May and June.

The central bank has stated that it could raise rates by a maximum seven times this year and continue its monetary tightening into 2023 to bring inflation back to its target of around 2% per annum.

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US Citizens Can Choose X Gender Marker on Passports Starting on April 11 - Blinken

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - US citizens can choose to identify themselves with the gender "X" when applying for passports starting on April 11, Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced on Thursday.

"Starting on April 11, US citizens will be able to select an X as their gender marker on their US passport application, and the option will become available for other forms of documentation next year," Blinken said in a statement.

Blinken said the policy was in keeping with the State Department's aim of providing inclusive service to all citizens, "regardless of their gender identity."

The State Department had previously announced last June that it was working to allow citizens to select a gender other than male or female when applying for passports, but did not indicate when the change would go into effect.

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Biden to Present Plan on Lowering US Gas Prices Thursday - White House

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Thursday will present his administration's plan to lower gasoline prices for the American public and mitigate the impact of the energy crisis, the White House said in a statement.

"The president delivers remarks on his Administration's actions to reduce the impact of [Russian President Vladimir] Putin's price hike on energy prices and lower gas prices at the pump for American families," the release said on Wednesday, noting that the speech is scheduled for 1:30 p.m. EST (5:30 p.m. GMT)

The International Monetary Fund since late 2021 has projected that global energy prices would rise due to slashes in new oil and gas investments due to the pandemic along with a sudden rise in demand as covid-related mitigation measures began to ease.

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US, EU Officials Agreed to Insist China Back Immediate End to Hostilities in Ukraine

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - US and EU officials during their first high-level dialogue on Russia agreed to insist that China support the immediate end to hostilities in Ukraine, the US State Department and European External Action Service said in a joint statement.

"They underlined the importance of insisting that China supports an immediate end to hostilities, the establishment of humanitarian corridors, and preventing any risks of further escalation," the statement said on Wednesday.

US and EU officials also agreed to continue to urge China to avoid circumventing sanctions against Russia and to not provide any type of support to Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, the statement said.

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US, EU in First High-Level Talks on Russia Discussed Steps to Further 'Isolate' Moscow

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - US and EU delegations during their first high-level dialogue on Russia discussed additional steps they may take to further isolate Moscow, the US State Department and European External Action Service said in a joint statement.

"The European Union and the United States held today in Washington, DC, the first US-EU High-Level Dialogue on Russia.... They also discussed additional steps to isolate Russia further

from the US and EU economies and the international financial system [and] to impose severe costs on Russia for its actions," the statement said on Wednesday.

The US delegation was led by Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland and the EU was led by European External Action Service Deputy Secretary General for Political Affairs Enrique Mora, the statement said. Both sides agreed to hold another high-level dialogue on Russia in late 2022, the statement said.

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US Naming Commission to Review Whether 750 Pentagon 'Items' Celebrate Confederate Persons

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The congressional Naming Commission announced it will review more than 750 "items" related to the Defense Department - markers, displays, monuments, vessels, streets, buildings, bridges and installations - to determine whether they celebrate persons who voluntarily served the Confederacy and recommend a name change or removal.

"We will update the inventory list in collaboration with the Department of Defense, including its sub-agencies and the military branches, as we continue to identify assets within our area of consideration," Naming Commission Chair Michelle Howard said on Wednesday.

Howard said the work of the commission is vital to understanding the scope and estimated cost of renaming or removing Confederate-named assets and will enable them to provide the "most accurate report possible" to Congress.

The commission must complete its review by October 1 and submit a report to the US House and Senate Armed Services committee that will include cost estimates for removing or renaming assets.

The listed items that the commission will review are at Army, Navy and Air Force installations in the United States and throughout the world.

The Naming Commission was formed in the wake of widespread protests and riots in the United States following the murder of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis in May of 2020.

The protests sparked the removal of a number of Confederate monuments across the country.

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Abu Dhabi Crown Prince, Blinken Meeting Put UAE-US Relations On 'Right Track' - Envoy

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - Secretary of State Antony Blinken's meeting with Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed earlier this week helped improve relations between the United States and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) after they soured over the last several months, Emirate Ambassador to the US Yousef Al Otaiba said in an interview.

Earlier in March, US media reported that the UAE and Saudi Arabia had declined requests from the United States to schedule calls with President Joe Biden as he sought to round up support amid the Ukraine conflict and oil supply crisis.

"It was a positive meeting that helps move the relationship between the UAE and the US back on the right track, where it belongs," Al Otaiba said as quoted by Axios on Wednesday.

The UAE, according to the report, was reportedly upset because the Biden administration has refused to redesignate the Houthis as a terror organization and because Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander Gen. Kenneth McKenzie delayed a visit to Abu Dhabi by about 22 days. The UAE was also disappointed the Biden administration's response to a Houthi missile and drone attack on Abu Dhabi earlier this year.

Blinken and the Crown Prince had a two hour meeting to discuss the recent tensions in the bilateral relationship, the Houthi attacks against the UAE, issues related to Iran and Syria, the Abraham Accords, and Russia's special military operation in Ukraine. Blinken during the talks welcomed the UAE's support in helping facilitate a ceasefire in Yemen.

On Wednesday, Blinken said that energy was not the focus of his meeting with the crown prince. Earlier this month, both Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and UAE Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan, after declining to speak with the US president, took phone calls from Russian President Vladimir Putin.

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Trudeau Announces \$2.3Mln for Indigenous Communities Mourning Location of Unmarked Graves

TORONTO, March 30 (Sputnik) - Canada's federal government has allotted \$2.3 million for indigenous communities in the province of British Columbia coping with discovery of unmarked graves on the site of a former residential school, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced. In January, the preliminary findings at the former St. Joseph's Mission Residential School site near Williams Lake, British Columbia, revealed the discovery of 93 unmarked grave sites likely belonging to children, who attended the forced assimilation school.

"Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau and Chief Willie Sellars of Williams Lake First Nation today announced C\$2.9 million [US\$2.3 million] in additional funding to continue supporting healing for First Nations communities in British Columbia whose children were taken from their families and sent to St. Joseph's Mission Residential School," the Prime Minister's Office said in a statement on Wednesday.

The announcement follows a tranche of \$1.1 million that the federal government allotted earlier this year to the same community.

From the 1880s through most of the 20th century, the government removed more than 150,000 indigenous from their parents by the government and sent them to residential schools where they were mistreated and brutalized. Financed by state government and operated by Catholic churches, the schools were designed to assimilate indigenous children.

To date, more than 1,800 unmarked graves have been found at former residential school sites across the country.

Trudeau's trip to Williams Lake First Nation coincides with the meeting between a delegation of Canadian indigenous leaders and Pope Francis at the Vatican. The Prime Minister said in response to reporters' questions that his trip had anything to do with the politics or timing of the meeting in the Vatican.

The Prime Minister repeated his stance that the Catholic Church must apologize for its role in what some have termed a genocide.

While Trudeau's excursion to Williams Lake First Nation was defended by officials, many former residents were not enthused by the Prime Minister's arrival.

"An apology would mean nothing to me," Frank Robbins, a St. Joseph's Mission Residential School survivor told Global News. "The damage is done and you can never fix what happened, you know? He'll never know the pain and hurt that we went through."

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Academy Says Will Smith Refused to Leave Oscars Show After Hitting Chris Rock

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - US actor Will Smith was asked to leave the Academy Awards show on Sunday after he hit comedian Chris Rock on stage but refused, the organization said in a statement.

"Things unfolded in a way we could not have anticipated," the Academy Awards said in a statement on Wednesday. "While we would like to clarify that Mr. Smith was asked to leave the ceremony and refused, we also recognize we could have handled the situation differently."

The Academy Awards apologized to Rock and all nominees, guests, and viewers for experiencing a deeply shocking and traumatic event.

The Academy Awards said earlier on Wednesday that its Board of Governors initiated disciplinary proceedings against Smith for violating the organization's standards of conduct, which includes inappropriate physical contact, abusive or threatening behavior, and compromising the integrity of the Academy.

Smith walked on stage and struck Rock's face after the comedian made a joke about his wife, Jada Pinkett Smith's, shaved head. Jada has alopecia, an autoimmune disorder that can cause baldness.

"Jada I love you, 'G.I. Jane 2,' can't wait to see it," Rock said moments before the incident. Smith shortly afterwards won the Best Actor Oscar for his role in the movie "King Richard," upon receiving of which he delivered a short speech addressing the incident and arguing he was standing up for his family.

In a statement on Instagram on Monday, Smith said his behavior at the Academy Awards was "unacceptable," and "inexcusable," then addressed Rock with an apology.

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Biden Expresses Condolences to Israeli Prime Minister After Terror Attacks - White House

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden spoke by telephone with Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett to convey his condolences after terror attacks in which 11 people across the country, the White House said in a readout of the call.

"President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. spoke today with Prime Minister Naftali Bennett of Israel to express his deepest condolences following the horrific terrorist attacks that have killed 11 people in three Israeli cities. The President emphasized that the United States stands firmly and resolutely with Israel in the face of this terrorist threat and all threats to the state of Israel," the readout said on Wednesday.

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More Americans Have Confidence in Zelenskyy Over Biden, European Leaders - Poll

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - More Americans have confidence in Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy as a leader than in US President Joe Biden and European heads of government or state like French President Emmanuel Macron, a new Pew Research poll revealed.

Seventy-two percent of Americans say they have some confidence or a lot of confidence in Zelenskyy to "do the right thing" in world affairs, a release on the poll said on Wednesday. By comparison, 55% of poll respondents said they have confidence in Macron, 53% in German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, and less than half, or 48%, in Biden.

Scholz's confidence score is 10 percentage points lower than that of his predecessor Angela Merkel, whose final rating landed at a 63% confidence level, the release said.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping received similarly low confidence ratings, with 15% expressing confidence in Xi and 6% in Putin, the release added.

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Biden Administration Split on Imposing Sanctions Against Kaspersky Lab - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - Biden administration officials are split on whether to impose sanctions on the Russian cybersecurity company Kaspersky Lab as part of the United States' response to Russia's special operation in Ukraine, Wall Street Journal reported.

The National Security Council urged Treasury Department officials to prepare sanctions targeting Kaspersky Lab, the report said on Wednesday.

However, Treasury Department sanction experts have expressed concern about the difficulty of the scale of such an effort, given that the company's software is used by hundreds of millions of individuals worldwide, the report added.

On Friday, the US Federal Communications Commission added Kaspersky Lab and two Chinese companies to a list of foreign companies that the Biden administration claims pose a threat to US national security.

German football club Eintracht Frankfurt ended earlier in March a sponsorship agreement with the Kaspersky Lab due to cybersecurity concerns voiced by the German government. The Moscow-based firm said that the warnings were political and not related to their products' integrity.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) -

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

- * The decision to move US military fleet out of the Black Sea ahead of the Russian military operation in Ukraine was a "prudent" move to demonstrate unwillingness to escalate the conflict, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said on Wednesday.
- * The United States is not yet ready to talk about the possibility of becoming a security guarantor for Ukraine, White House Director of Communications Kate Bedingfield said.
- * Pentagon department heads and employees as well as main contractors had been involved in the creation of biological weapons components in Ukraine and these companies were directly linked to Hunter Biden, son of US President Joe Biden, Russian Defense Ministry spokesperson Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov said.
- * Russia is conducting a planned redeployment of forces on Kiev and Chernihiv directions, Konashenkov said.

PUTIN TALKS WITH SCHOLTZ, DRAGHI

- * German Chancellor Olaf Scholz spoke by telephone with Russian President Vladimir Putin and said that German companies would pay for gas supplies from Russia in euros, government spokesperson Steffen Hebestreit said on Wednesday.
- * Putin and Scholz discussed results of Russia-Ukraine talks in Turkey and gas payment issues during a phone conversation, the Kremlin said.
- * Putin briefed Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi on the progress of the peace talks with Ukraine in Istanbul, the Kremlin said.
- * Putin provided Draghi with an explanation in connection with the decision to seek rubles as payment for gas supplies, the Kremlin said.

SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

- * The US Commerce Department blacklisted an additional 73 aircraft that recently flew to Russia in violation of newly-imposed export controls, Reuters reported on Wednesday.
- * The United States is exploring options to bolster sanctions against Russia in response to its ongoing special operation in Ukraine, White House Communications Director Kate Bedingfield said on Wednesday.
- * It is possible to expand anti-Russia sanctions and further restrict the country's access to the SWIFT payment system, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson's spokesman said on Wednesday, US media reported.

DIPLOMATIC DISPUTES

- * The Russian Embassy in Bratislava confirmed that its staff, by decision of the Slovak Foreign Ministry, is being reduced by 35 employees, diplomats must leave the republic within one month, that is, by April 30 this year, the embassy's spokesman, Vitaly Zhitnyuk, told Sputnik on Wednesday.

BIDEN-ZELENSKY TALKS

- * President Joe Biden and Volodymyr Zelenskyy discussed on Wednesday efforts by the United States and European allies to enhance Ukraine's military capabilities, the White House said.
- * Zelenskyy during a telephone call updated Biden on the status of Kiev's negotiations with Moscow, the White House said.
- * Biden informed Zelenskyy that his administration intends to provide Ukraine with an additional \$500 million in assistance, the White House said.

ENERGY MARKETS

- * Gas deliveries from Russia to Austria continue without restrictions, gas storages are filled by 13%, this is the average figure for recent years, the federal chancellor's office said on Wednesday.
- * Russia intends to further supply Europe with energy but Moscow's interests should be considered, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said.
- * OPEC+ countries urge world leaders to ensure unimpeded, stable and secure energy supplies to the global market, OPEC Secretary General Mohammad Barkindo said.

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US 'Not OK' With Russia Integrating Donbas - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The United States is not okay with President Vladimir Putin integrating the Donbas region of Ukraine into Russia as a result of the conflict with its neighbor, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"No, no, not at all," Kirby said during an interview with Fox News when asked whether Russia will be getting Donbas. "Ukraine sovereignty must be respected. So no, it's not okay with the United States if Mr. Putin gets to grab a piece of territory."

Earlier in March, US President Joe Biden said it is up to Kiev to decide whether to cede some territory to gain a ceasefire with Russia. Meanwhile, Volodymyr Zelenskyy's Chief of Staff Andriy Yermak said that Ukraine is not going to cede any of its territories or sovereignty to Russia as it has to remain the frontier in the way of alleged Russian aggression.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Ministry of Defense said the operation is solely targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure and the civilian population is not in danger.

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US Blacklists Additional 73 Aircraft That Recently Flew to Russia - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The US Commerce Department blacklisted an additional 73 aircraft that recently flew to Russia in violation of newly-imposed export controls, Reuters reported on Wednesday.

The aircraft allegedly violated US export control recently put in place as part of the Biden administration's new wave of sanctions against Russia over its special military operation in Ukraine, the report said.

The United States blacklisted 100 aircraft earlier this month for violating the export controls placed on Russia. It included 33 Aeroflot planes and one plane owned by Russian businessman Roman Abramovich.

Providing any form of service to the blacklisted aircraft requires authorization from the US government.

Anyone providing service to the aircraft without authorization risks substantial jail time, fines, loss of export privileges, or other restrictions, according to the Commerce Department.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Ministry of Defense said the operation is solely targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure and the civilian population is not in danger.

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Oil Up 3% on Wednesday Based on Talk of New Russia Sanctions

NEW YORK, March 30 (Sputnik) - Crude prices settled up 3% on Wednesday as traders reacted to talk of the United States and its allies planning to impose new sanctions against Russia while the OPEC+ alliance of oil producers signaled it will not allow much new supply into the market.

The first weekly build in US gasoline and distillate inventories reported by Energy Information Administration (EIA) went largely ignored despite the bearish implications of a market potentially seeing demand destruction with pump prices at near record highs of above \$4 per gallon.

London-traded Brent, the global oil benchmark, settled the official session up \$3.22, or 2.9%, at \$113.45 per barrel. Brent fell 2% on Tuesday.

New York-traded West Texas Intermediate (WTI), which serves as the benchmark for US crude, rose \$3.58, or 3.4%, to settle at \$107.82. WTI fell 1.6% in the previous session.

The United States and its allies said they were planning new sanctions on more sectors of Russia's economy, including military supply chains, in response to the country's five-week long special military operation in Ukraine.

Major oil producers in the OPEC+ alliance, which includes Russia, are likely to stick to their scheduled output target increase of about 432,000 barrels daily when the group meets on Thursday, reports citing sources familiar with the matter said.

The 23-nation strong OPEC+ is determined to keep crude prices at or above \$100 a barrel by sticking to monthly increments of about 400,000 barrels per day in production to ensure the market does not get flooded with supply.

US stockpiles of gasoline rose by 785,000 barrels last week while that of distillates grew by almost 1.4 million barrels, the EIA said in its Weekly Petroleum Status Report published on Wednesday.

Analysts polled by US media had expected a drop of 1.7 million barrels in gasoline inventories and a reduction of 1.55 million for distillates last week.

Automobile fuel gasoline, also known as petrol outside the United States, is America's most-consumed oil product. Distillates, which are refined into diesel for trucks, buses, trains and ships as well as fuel for jets, have been the strongest growth component of the US oil complex for months, seeing virtually non-stop inventory declines since early January.

The build in gasoline stockpiles come as the national average pump price in the United States held at above \$4.23 per gallon on Wednesday, just a dime below the March 11 record high of \$4.33 reported by the American Automobile Association.

"It shows that high prices are doing their work in causing demand destruction to oil," John Kilduff, partner at New York energy hedge fund Again Capital, said.

The EIA also reported that crude oil inventories fell by almost 3.5 million barrels last week versus industry estimates for a drawdown of 1.02 million barrels.

But a breakdown of the numbers issued by the agency showed that 3 million barrels came from the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR), suggesting that other sources of demand for crude accounted for just about half a million barrels.

The Biden administration has been supplying refiners with loaned crude from the SPR for months in the hope that it will ultimately result in lower prices for both crude and finished products like gasoline and diesel. There has been negligible effect so far on crude prices from the government's effort as refiners have been turning more products than they usually do at this time of year, resulting in extraordinarily high crude drawdowns.

US refinery utilization was at a multi-week high of 92.1% last week, suggesting that refiners were churning out products at a faster-than-usual rate on concerns that the market may get caught with short supply later.

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White House Says Defers to CDC Border Expulsion Policy, Bracing for Migrant Surge If Ended

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration defers to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) when it comes to deciding whether to lift Title 42 restrictions that allow for migrant deportations on public health grounds while it prepares for an influx of people at the border should they lift it, White House Communications Director Kate Bedingfield said on Wednesday.

"This is a decision that we have long deferred to CDC. Title 42 is a public health directive, it is not an immigration or migration enforcement measure, so the decision on when to lift Title 42, we defer to the CDC. That being said, we are planning for multiple contingencies, and we have every expectation that when the CDC ultimately decides it's appropriate to lift Title 42, there will be an influx of people to the border," Bedingfield said during a White House press briefing. Title 42 was invoked by the Trump administration in 2020 in response to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The rule authorizes US border officials to deport migrants in order to stop the spread of contagious disease.

The Department of Homeland Security has plans to respond to the possible arrival of 12,000-18,000 illegal migrants at the US southern border daily should Title 42 be lifted, CBS News said on Tuesday in a report, citing DHS officials.

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US Expects Russian POW to Be Treated in Accordance With International Law - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The United States expects Russian prisoners of war to be treated in accordance with international law and Geneva Conventions, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said during a press briefing on Wednesday.

"Our expectations and the expectations of the international community is that all prisoners of war will be treated in accordance with the international law and the Geneva Conventions," Kirby said when asked to comment on viral videos showing Ukrainian troops torturing and killing captured Russian soldiers in Ukraine.

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US Sanctions on Iran's Missile Program Unrelated to 2015 Nuclear Deal - White House

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - Sanctions which the United States has recently introduced against the Iranian ballistic missile program are unrelated to the 2015 nuclear deal, White House director of communications Kate Bedingfield said on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, the US sanctioned one individual and four entities in Iran for allegedly being a part of a covert military procurement operation. The Treasury Department noted the announcement follows an Iranian missile strike on Erbil, which the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps says targeted two Mossad training centers for Israeli forces, and assaults by Yemen's Houthi rebels on Saudi targets.

"These sanctions [on Iranians that were introduced today] are not connected to the Iranian nuclear deal," Bedingfield told a briefing.

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US Continues to Look at Options to Expand Sanctions Against Russia - White House

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The United States is exploring options to bolster sanctions against Russia in response to its ongoing special operation in Ukraine, White House Communications Director Kate Bedingfield said on Wednesday.

"We are continuing to look at options to expand and deepen our sanctions, and I anticipate that we would probably have more for you on that in the coming days," Bedingfield said during a White House press briefing.

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US Moving Ships Out of Black Sea Ahead of Russian Operation 'Prudent Decision' - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The decision to move US military fleet out of the Black Sea ahead of the Russian military operation in Ukraine was a "prudent" move to demonstrate unwillingness to escalate the conflict, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"It was a prudent decision to do as we continued to see an invasion [of Ukraine] as more imminent to make it very clear to everybody that the United States was not interested in enforcing a conflict by some posture decision that we are making," Kirby said during a press briefing.

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US Says Not Yet Ready to Talk About Possibility of Becoming Security Guarantor for Ukraine

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The United States is not yet ready to talk about the possibility of becoming a security guarantor for Ukraine, White House director of communications Kate Bedingfield said on Wednesday.

"There is nothing specific about security guarantee I can speak of at this time," she told a press briefing, when asked if Washington was ready to provide security guarantees to Ukraine.

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Pentagon Estimates Russia Repositioned 20% of Troops Around Kiev in Past 24 Hours

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) – In the past 24 hours, Russia has repositioned about 20% of its troops that had previously been stationed around Kiev, and some of the battalion tactical groups have been moved to Belarus, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"We have seen over the last 24 hours the repositioning of a small percentage of the troops and the battalion tactical groups that Russia had arrayed against Kiev, probably in the neighborhood of 20% of what they had," Kirby said during a press briefing. "We think some of them not all but some of them have already moved into Belarus."

At the same time, the United States has seen no indications of Russian troops being repositioned to their home garrisons, he added.

On Tuesday, Kirby said the United States has seen a small number of Russian troops begin to move away from Kiev after Russia and Ukraine held peace talks in Istanbul. Russia's chief negotiator Vladimir Medinsky said the talks were constructive, with Moscow announcing that it will scale down its military activities in the Kiev and Chernihiv regions.

On February 24, Russia launched a military operation in Ukraine responding to calls for help from the Donbas republics in defending themselves against the aggression of Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure only, but later accused Ukrainian forces of using typical terrorist methods, such as hiding behind civilians and positioning weapons systems in civilian areas.

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Top American Brass to Take Look at US European Defense Posture Going Forward - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - Senior US defense officials will look into changing the US defense posture in Europe, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"Senior leadership at the [Defense] Department are going to take a look at our European posture going forward," Kirby said during a press briefing.

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US Charges Chinese National in Plot to Repatriate Dissenters - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The US charged Chinese national Sun Hoi Ying with acting and conspiring to act as a foreign agent in connection with Beijing's campaign to repatriate dissenters, the Justice Department said on Wednesday.

"The PRC Government launched a campaign... to repress dissent and to forcibly repatriate so-called 'fugitives,'" US Attorney Damien Williams said in a statement. "We allege Mr. Sun, as part of that campaign, attempted to threaten and coerce a victim into bending to the PRC's will, even using a co-conspirator who is a member of local US law enforcement to reinforce that the victim had no choice but to comply with the PRC Government's demands."

As part of what China dubbed "Operation Fox Hunt," the release added, Sun used private investigators to surveil and gather personal information about a US citizen living in New York City for the purposes of blackmail.

The Justice Department alleged that the 53-year-old Sun aimed to force individuals back to China so they could face charges brought by the government in Beijing.

Sun, who is at large in China, faces up to 15 years in prison for acting and conspiring to act as an agent of a foreign government without notifying the Attorney General, the release said.

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Apple, Meta Provided User Data to Hackers Posing as Law Enforcement Officials - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - US tech companies Meta (banned in Russia) and Apple gave user data to hackers posing as law enforcement officials last year, Bloomberg reported on Wednesday.

The report, citing three people familiar with the situation, said that hackers made a forged emergency data request to Apple and Meta in 2021.

As a result of the forged legal request, the tech companies provided users' addresses, phone numbers, and IP addresses to the hackers, the report noted.

Snap Inc. also received a forged legal request for users' data but it isn't known if they provided the information to the same hackers, according to the news agency.

Emergency data requests are usually made after a search warrant or subpoena is approved by a US judge, but it's not necessary, the report added.

The hackers are believed to be part of cybercriminal group Recursion Team. Some of the hackers are believed to be living in the United Kingdom and the United States, and one of the members is a minor who may be the mastermind behind the cybercriminal group Lapsus\$, the report said.

The Lapsus\$ cybercriminal group reportedly recently hacked Microsoft Corp., Samsung Electronics Co., Nvidia Corp, and others.

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US to Run Out of Monoclonal Antibody Supply by Late May Without Extra Funding - Biden

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) – The United States may face a lack of monoclonal antibody supplies, essential for COVID-19 treatment, by the end of May unless Congress approves additional funding, President Joe Biden said on Wednesday.

"Without more funding, we will start to run out of them [supplies] by the end of May. We also had to scale back our plans to purchase more preventive therapies for Americans who are immunocompromised," Biden told reporters at the White House.

The president called on Congress to approve the extra funding, adding that this is not a partisan issue.

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Blinken Thanks N. Macedonia Prime Minister for Support on Ukraine - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke by telephone with N. Macedonian Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski to congratulate him on his new position and thank him for Macedonia's support of Ukraine, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke today with North Macedonia Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski. Secretary Blinken congratulated Prime Minister Kovachevski on his new position and on the formation of the new cabinet. The Secretary thanked North Macedonia for its unwavering and steadfast support for Ukraine in the face of President Putin's continued brutal war of aggression," Price said in a readout of the leaders' call.

Blinken thanked Kovachevski for Macedonia's commitment to NATO as its newest member, as well as for hosting evacuees from Afghanistan, the readout said.

Blinken also said the United States looks forward to further cooperation with Macedonia on a number of security and defense issues to promote democracy and stability in the region, according to the readout.

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Biden Says Will Try to See Parents of Ex-US Marine Trevor Reed Held in Russia

(Adds background in paras 4,5)

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that he will try to see the parents of former American Marine Trevor Reed, who is serving a nine year term in a Russian correctional colony in Mordovia for assaulting police officers.

"I am going to see if I can get to see them. They are good people," Biden told reporters, while receiving his second COVID-19 booster shot at the White House.

Reed's parents were protesting outside the White House to raise awareness about his case. They placed a poster "Free Trevor Reed, Prisoner of Russia Since 2019."

Earlier on Wednesday, Reed's lawyer Sergey Nikitenkov said that his client began a second hunger strike.

Reed, a 29-year-old US student, was arrested in Moscow in 2019 after getting drunk and picking a fight with two women, authorities said. Police said he then attacked two policemen who were called to the scene, punching one of them during a car ride after detention and nearly causing the car to crash. He was sentenced to nine years in prison in 2020, but denied the charges.

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UN Recovers All Peacekeeper Bodies Killed in Helicopter Crash in DR Congo - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) was able to recover the bodies of all eight peacekeepers who were killed in a helicopter incident, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday.

"The bodies of our colleagues were recovered yesterday during the initial search and rescue operation that was launched by the peacekeeping operations," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

On Tuesday, MONUSCO said it lost contact with one of its helicopters sent on a reconnaissance mission in the Tshanzu area. Eight people were on board, including six crew members from the Pakistan military, one Russian and one Serbian soldier.

The Democratic Republic of Congo's military said they believe the helicopter was shot down by the so-called M23 rebels.

Dujarric said an investigation into the incident will soon be undertaken by a MONUSCO team in cooperation with the government.

"The mission is also continuing to carry out reconnaissance in the area to monitor the activities of these groups," he added.

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UPDATE - Biden Gets Second Vaccine Booster Shot, Launches COVID.gov Site

(Adds more details, fixes typo in quote in para 3)

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden received his second COVID-19 booster shot on Wednesday and announced the launch of a government pandemic information site and tool that aims to allow Americans to handle the virus.

On Tuesday, the US Food and Drug Administration said it authorized a second booster of the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines for those aged 50 and older.

"Today I am announcing the launch of Covid.gov," Biden said at a press conference. "A one-stop shop where anyone in America can find what they need to navigate the virus."

After the comments the US president sat down, rolled up his sleeve, and then received his second booster shot, which was administered by the White House medical unit.

"It didn't hurt a bit," Biden said.

The president also urged all Americans to get booster shots.

COVID.gov is designed to give Americans easy access to COVID-19 related vaccines, masks, tests, treatments and current updates on the pandemic, the White House said.

More than 977,000 Americans have died of COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said. Overall, COVID-19 cases appear to be waning with death and hospitalizations falling, although the effects of the BA.2 variant is a concern to doctors, researchers and others in the medical community.

To date, about 70 percent of Americans 5 years and older are fully vaccinated. And though older Americans lead the way with about 90 percent of them 65 and older fully vaccinated, about 41 percent of the more than 110 million people 50 or older are fully vaccinated but have not received their first booster, the CDC and US Census Bureau data indicates.

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Biden Gets Second Vaccine Booster Shot, Launches COVID.gov Site

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Republicans Say CDC Ignored Science, Worked With Teachers Unions on School Guidance in US

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has ignored science in its approach to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus and worked with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), a major campaign supporter of now President Joe Biden, on school reopening guidance, Republican congressmen said in a statement on Wednesday.

"The facts are clear: Biden's CDC overrode routine practice to allow a radical teachers union that donated millions of dollars to Democrat campaigns to bypass scientific norms and rewrite official agency guidance. The damaging edits by union bosses effectively kept thousands of schools shuttered across the country, locking millions of children out of their classrooms," Republican Whip Steve Scalise and US House Committee on Oversight and Reform Ranking Member James Comer said in the statement.

Both lawmakers accused the Biden administration of replacing medical science with political opinions in order to reward the ATF, despite harming millions of students.

"They bypassed the science to put union bosses ahead of children," the lawmakers said.

The White House provided ATF "unprecedented access" to the policymaking process during the reopening of schools, the statement said. CDC Director Rochelle Walensky personally managed

this coordination, which includes receiving and implementing changes to the guidelines provided by the teachers association, it added.

"Her involvement was contrary to the CDC's practice to keep draft guidance documents confidential," the report said.

Republicans also noted that the Biden administration included almost all ATF's recommendations to its final operational strategy, according to the report.

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Over 40% of Canadians Struggling to Afford Basic Necessities, Young Hit Hardest - Poll

TORONTO, March 30 (Sputnik) - More than two in five Canadians are struggling to afford basic necessities, with the younger population being challenged the most, a Nanos-Bloomberg poll revealed on Wednesday.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Tuesday warned of an impending "difficult time," including food and energy shortages, amid the inflationary crisis with the inflation rate having risen to 5.7 percent in February - the highest increase since August of 1991.

"One in five, respectively, say it's become difficult to afford basic necessities (21%) or it has become difficult to afford basic necessities and they've had to cancel a major purchase because of increasing prices (20%)," a report on the poll said.

Canadians aged between 18 and 34 are being hit the hardest, according to the poll, with more than a quarter saying they are struggling to afford basic necessities and an additional 25.4 percent indicating they have had to cancel major purchases as well as struggling to make ends meet, the report said.

Approximately 60% of Canadians say they are not confident that inflation levels will return to normal, with the younger demographic being the least hopeful, the report added.

According to the state statistics agency, prices at the pump were up 32.3% in February, while food prices are up more than 7%, with meat and dairy products seeing the sharpest spikes.

Critics have blamed the Trudeau government for pursuing a monetary policy that has been driving Canadians into severe financial hardship. However, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has claimed the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's special military operation in Ukraine are responsible for Canada's economic crisis.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has previously dismissed similar accusations, including by US President Joe Biden, saying Russia's campaign to demilitarize and de-Nazify Ukraine has nothing to do with rising soaring prices in the United States.

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Google Says Gov't-Backed Hackers From Russia, China, N. Korea Use Ukraine-Related Themes

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - Google's Threat Analysis Group (TAG) has found that the hackers from Russia, China and North Korea, which are backed by their governments, are using the topics related to Ukraine to get targets to open malicious emails, the company said on Wednesday.

"TAG has observed a continuously growing number of threat actors using the war as a lure in phishing and malware campaigns. Government-backed actors from China, Iran, North Korea and Russia, as well as various unattributed groups, have used various Ukraine war-related themes in an effort to get targets to open malicious emails or click malicious links," the statement said.

According to the company, financially motivated and criminal perpetrators are also using the events for targeting users.

"For example, one actor is impersonating military personnel to extort money for rescuing relatives in Ukraine. TAG has also continued to observe multiple ransomware brokers continuing to operate in a business as usual sense," it explained.

On February 24, Russia launched a military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk appealed for help in defending themselves against Ukrainian provocations. In response to Russia's operation, Western countries have rolled out a comprehensive sanctions campaign against Moscow.

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US Needs to Resume Military Presence in Black Sea - EUCOM Chief

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The United States needs to resume its military presence in the Black Sea in light of Russia's special operation in Ukraine, US European Command (EUCOM) chief Gen. Tod Wolters said in a congressional testimony on Wednesday.

"We have to image our way through the next five or ten years and we're doing that with respect to the Black Sea," Wolters told the US House Armed Services Committee. "Turkey is the owner of the Montreux declaration, and I would just characterize what they're doing in this arena as very picky with who goes through ... but we need to get back in the Black Sea and it needs to occur sooner rather than later."

In spite of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, there is still some travel back and forth with small commercial vessels through the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles straits, Wolters said.

The Montreux Convention of 1936 ensures the freedom of passage through the straits for merchant ships both in times of peace and war, but regulations may differ by country. The document limits the period of stay in the Black Sea of warships of non-Black Sea states to three weeks. In emergency situations, Turkey has the right to prohibit or restrict the passage of military ships through the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles.

Kiev has repeatedly called on the Turkish government to block the passage of Russian ships due to Moscow's ongoing military operation in Ukraine that began on February 24.

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Biden Admin. to Provide \$3.2Bln to Help Lower Home Energy Costs - US Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is allocating \$3.2 billion from the bipartisan infrastructure bill to help lower home energy costs for the US public, the White House said on Wednesday.

"President Biden and the US Department of Energy (DOE) today announced DOE is accepting applications from states, Tribes, and territories for \$3.16 billion in new funding through the Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP) – DOE's largest residential energy retrofit program," the White House said in a press release.

The program will allow states to retrofit thousands of low-income homes to make them healthier and more energy efficient while lowering utility bills, the release said.

The program is designed to assist with installing insulation, updating heating and cooling systems, upgrading electrical appliances, and taking other steps to make homes warmer in the winter and cooler in the summer with less energy usage, the release added.

The Weatherization Assistance Program has existed since 1976 and has helped provide an average of \$372 in annual energy savings for seven million homes in the United States, according to the release.

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US Military's Europe Chief Says Not to Send Fighter Jets to Ukraine, Other Nations Can
WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The United States should not itself send fighter jets to Ukraine amid the ongoing Russian special operation in the country, European Command chief and NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe Gen. Tod Wolters said on Wednesday.

"It is my best military advice that the US doesn't, and it's also my best military advice that we allow nations to independently make their decisions about what they would like to offer to Ukrainians," Wolters said during a House Armed Services Committee hearing on Ukraine.

The Biden administration pushed back on efforts by Poland to supply Ukraine with fighter jets via the US, citing concerns over potential escalation with Russia.

The decision stands in opposition to Volodymyr Zelenskyy's calls to provide Kiev with such aircraft.

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US Actor Bruce Willis to Retire After Being Diagnosed With Aphasia Brain Disorder - Family

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - US actor Bruce Willis will retire after being diagnosed with aphasia brain disorder, his family said on social media on Wednesday.

"To Bruce's amazing supporters, as a family we wanted to share that our beloved Bruce has been experiencing some health issues and has recently been diagnosed with aphasia, which is impacting his cognitive abilities. As a result of this and with much consideration Bruce is stepping away from the career that has meant so much to him," his family said in a statement posted on Instagram.

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US, Russia Continue Arms Control Dialogue on New START Treaty - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The United States and Russia continue their arms control dialogue with respect to the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) and Moscow continues to comply with the accord, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Celeste Wallander said in a congressional hearing on Wednesday.

"Russia has shown no indications that it doesn't value that treaty and continue to comply with it. And the United States will continue to focus on making sure that Russia complies and we continue to have the arms control dialogue with Russia on that treaty," Wallander told the US House Armed Services Committee.

The New START Treaty, effective since February 5, 2011, entails that each side would gradually reduce its nuclear arsenal to a total of 700 rockets, 1,550 warheads and 800 launchers.

In February 2021, Moscow and Washington extended the deal for five more years without any renegotiation of its terms and it is now set to expire on February 5, 2026. Any further extension of the accord is ruled out in line with the document.

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Blinken Says Energy Not Focus in Talks With Abu Dhabi Crown Prince

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday that energy was not a key topic of discussion during his meeting with Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan in Morocco this week.

"As to energy, we believe it's critical that there be abundant supplies of energy on markets now and there also be a steady supply, but as it happens, we didn't focus on that issue specifically," Blinken said during a press conference in Algeria.

Blinken said the meeting with the Crown Prince focused on Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, the Iran nuclear deal negotiations and the situation in Syria.

In early March, US media reported that Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE) leaders ignored calls from the White House to discuss efforts to increase oil production amid the Western countries' efforts to isolate Russia over its special military operation in Ukraine. Moreover, the UAE Energy and Infrastructure Minister said the supplies of Russian oil are critical for the oil markets and no other country will be able to replace them.

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Biden, Zelenskyy Discuss Efforts to Boost Ukraine's Military Capability - White House

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden and Volodymyr Zelenskyy discussed on Wednesday efforts by the United States and European allies to enhance Ukraine's military capabilities, the White House said.

"The leaders discussed how the United States is working around the clock to fulfill the main security assistance requests by Ukraine, the critical effects those weapons have had on the conflict, and continued efforts by the United States with allies and partners to identify additional capabilities to help the Ukrainian military defend its country," the White House said in a press release.

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US EUCOM Chief Says Time to Re-Examine NATO's Permanent Architecture in Eastern Europe

(Updates with more details, background in paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - Russia's special military operation in Ukraine is an opportunity for NATO to re-examine its permanent military architecture in Eastern Europe, US European Command chief Gen. Tod Wolters said on Wednesday.

"It's got to change and certainly this is an opportunity as a result of this senseless act on behalf of Russia to re-examine the permanent military architecture that exists not only in Eastern Europe, but in our air policing activity in aviation, in our standing naval maritime groups," Wolters told a US House Armed Services Committee hearing.

The general added that the activity to change the military architecture in Eastern Europe is ongoing and the United States will continue to do that.

On Tuesday, Wolters said during a US Senate hearing that he believes the number of US troops in Europe will increase due to the changed security environment in Eastern Europe.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Ministry of Defense said the operation is solely targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure and the civilian population is not in danger.

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Zelenskyy Updates Biden on Status of Negotiations With Russia - White House

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - Volodymyr Zelenskyy during a telephone call on Wednesday updated US President Joe Biden on the status of Kiev's negotiations with Moscow, the White House said.

The call lasted for almost an hour.

"President Zelenskyy updated President Biden on the status of Ukraine's negotiations with Russia," the White House said in a press release.

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Biden Told Zelenskyy US Intends to Provide \$500Mln in Additional Assistance - White House

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Wednesday informed Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy that his administration intends to provide Ukraine with an additional \$500 million in assistance, the White House said.

"President Biden informed President Zelenskyy that the United States intends to provide the Ukrainian government with \$500 million in direct budgetary aid," the White House said in a press release.

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Biden Family Paid Nearly \$5Mln, Benefitted From Deals With Chinese Executives - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - Entities controlled by Hunter and James Biden received \$4.8 million in payments from Chinese business executives due to their relation to now-US President Joe Biden, The Washington Post reported on Wednesday.

Biden's son and brother were paid \$4.8 million over the course of 14 months by CEFC China Energy, the report said, citing a review of emails found on a laptop once belonging to Hunter, as well as court documents, government records and bank statements.

Hunter received at least \$3.79 million in payments from the Chinese energy conglomerate through consulting contracts, the report said. He also received a \$1 million retainer to represent Patrick Ho, a CEFC official who was later charged in connection with a bribery scheme in Africa, according to the report.

CEFC had financing from government development banks and links to the Chinese Communist Party and military, with experts on the Chinese economy saying it is unlikely that it operated independently of the government, the report added.

Hunter also signed an agreement with Chinese energy executive Gongwen Dong to receive a one-time retainer payment of \$500,000 as well as a \$100,000 monthly stipend to jointly pursue investments, the report said. James also received a \$65,000 monthly stipend under the deal, the report also said.

The money was directed over a 14-month period to an account linked to Hunter, usually in \$165,000 increments, according to the report. Roughly \$1.4 million was then transferred to a consulting firm run by James, the report said.

There was no evidence found indicating that Joe Biden personally benefited from the deals or knew about their details, the report noted.

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Canada's Former Top Soldier Pleads Guilty to Obstructing Justice in Military Sex Scandal

TORONTO, March 30 (Sputnik) - Canada's former Chief of Defense Staff Gen. Jonathan Vance has pleaded guilty to one charge of obstruction of justice in connection to a recent military sex scandal, Global News reported on Wednesday.

The public became aware of the allegations against Vance, who is accused of misconduct by two female subordinates, in February that set off a political firestorm that plagued the Canadian Armed Forces and the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

"Guilty, your honor," the report quoted Vance as telling an Ontario Court of Justice judge.

Vance was granted a conditional discharge for the term of 12 month, meaning the country's former top military commander will not have a criminal record, should he comply with the terms set out by the judge. The judge in the case has ordered Vance to complete 80 hours of community service and forego communication with one of the alleged victims.

The charge against Vance was laid by the Canadian Forces National Investigation Service (CFNIS) last July following a six-month long investigation.

The Canadian military sex scandal took several turns, with Vance's replacement, Adm. Art McDonald, being forced to step down amid similar allegations weeks after his appointment and the government's former COVID-19 vaccine distribution czar, Maj. Gen. Dany Fortin, was forced to resign from his post last May and has since been charged with one count of sexual assault by police in Quebec.

The affair has also inflicted a political toll, with former National Defense Minister Harjit Sajjan being shuffled out of the role following the 2021 federal election, reportedly over the scandal.

The political firestorm forced the government to embark on the second independent review of sexual misconduct in the Canadian military in five years.

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US Gasoline, Distillate Stockpiles Up 1st Time Since January as Prices Bite - EIA Data

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - US inventories of gasoline as well as distillates rose last week for the first time since January as record high fuel prices bit into Americans' purchases, data from the Energy Information Administration (EIA) showed on Wednesday.

Stockpiles of gasoline rose by 785,000 barrels last week while that of distillates grew by almost 1.4 million barrels, the EIA said in its Weekly Petroleum Status Report published Wednesday. Analysts polled by US media had expected a drop of 1.7 million barrels in gasoline inventories and a reduction of 1.55 million for distillates last week.

Automobile fuel gasoline is America's most-consumed oil product. Distillates, which are refined into diesel for trucks, buses, trains and ships as well as fuel for jets, have been the strongest growth component of the US oil complex for months, seeing virtually non-stop inventory declines since early January.

The build in gasoline stockpiles come as the national average pump price in the United States held at above \$4.23 per gallon on Wednesday, just a dime below the March 11 record high of \$4.33 reported by the American Automobile Association.

"This shows that high prices are doing their work in bringing demand destruction to oil," John Kilduff, partner at New York energy hedge fund Again Capital, said.

The EIA also reported that crude oil inventories fell by almost 3.5 million barrels last week versus industry estimates for a drawdown of 1.02 million.

But a breakdown of the numbers issued by the agency showed that 3 million barrels of that came from the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) — implying that other demand sources for crude accounted for just about half a million barrels.

SPR outflows have been at around 3 million barrels each week as the Biden administration provides select refiners with oil from the nation's emergency reserve instead of making them buy from the open market, where crude trades near 14-year highs of \$110-\$120 a barrel due to sanctions on major oil exporter Russia.

Refinery utilization was at a multi-week high of 92.1% last week, showing refiners were churning out products at a faster-than-usual rate on concerns that the market may get caught by supply shortage later.

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UN Estimates 2Bln People Live in Conflict Affected Zones - Guterres

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The United Nations estimates that almost 2 billion people around the world are living in areas affected by violent conflict, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said on Wednesday.

"One quarter of humanity lives in conflict-affected areas, 2 billion people, " Guterres said at a virtual meeting of the UN Peacebuilding Commission.

Guterres reiterated that peacekeeping is the main task of the United Nations now, noting that 84 million people were forcibly displaced from their home areas last year because of conflicts,

violence and human rights violations. At least 274 million people will need humanitarian assistance in 2022.

"We are facing the highest number of violent conflicts since 1945," Guterres said.

The UN Secretary General acknowledged that conflicts affected almost every part of the world, from Yemen to Syria, from Haiti to Sahel, and the current crisis in Ukraine is causing serious problems with fuel and food to many developing countries.

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Biden to Use Cold-War Powers to Boost US Electric Vehicle Material Output - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden intends to invoke Cold War-era powers this week to boost US production of critical minerals for the making of electric-vehicle and other types of batteries, Bloomberg reported on Wednesday.

Battery materials can be added to the list of items covered by the 1950 Defense Production Act, the report said, noting that it will essentially be similar to the authority used by Harry Truman to make steel during the Korean War and which Donald Trump used to encourage mask and ventilator production at the height of the coronavirus outbreak in 2020.

To win his war against global warming and triumph in an economic showdown with China, Biden will need vast US reserves of lithium, the critical component in battery-making.

The Politico news website reported earlier this year that conservationists and indigenous activists were challenging the president's agenda with lawsuits against production of lithium, a component that health experts say can cause headaches to nausea, vomiting and even kidney damage from prolonged exposure.

In some states, such as Maine and North Carolina, local laws and restrictions are making lithium mining harder.

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US Imposes New Sanctions on 1 Individual, 4 Entities in Iran - Treasury

(Updates with more details, background in paras 4-6)

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The United States has sanctioned one individual and four entities in Iran who are alleged to be part of a covert military procurement operation, the US Department of the Treasury announced on Wednesday.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned an Iran-based procurement agent and his network of companies that procured ballistic missile propellant-related materials for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Research and Self Sufficiency Jihad Organization (IRGC RSSJO), the Treasury Department said in a statement.

The sanctions target Mohammad Ali Hosseini, the agent used to procure ballistic missile fuel and related materials for the IRGC RSSJO, and an alleged network of the companies Sina Composite, Sepehr Delijan and Jestar Sanat. The US government alleges that IRGS RSSJO is the unit responsible for Iran's ballistic missile development program.

In addition, the United States imposed sanctions on Parchin Chemical Industries (PCI), which is said to be affiliated with Iran's publicly owned defense contractor, and an intermediary, P.B. Sadr Co.

The sanctions allow the US government to seize all assets owned by the designated individuals and entities in the United States, should there be any, and prohibit US and foreign entities with engaging in financial transactions with them.

The Treasury Department said the announcement follows an Iranian missile strike on Erbil, which the IRGC claimed targeted two Mossad training centers for Israeli forces, assaults by Yemen's Houthi rebels on Saudi targets.

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US Private Employers Added 455,000 Jobs From February to March - Payrolls Processor ADP

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - Private employers in the United States added 455,000 jobs from February to March, sustaining the growth of the labor market driving economic recovery from the two-year long coronavirus pandemic, private payrolls processor ADP said Wednesday.

"Private sector employment increased by 455,000 jobs from February to March," the payrolls processor said, citing the March ADP National Employment Report.

The ADP report came ahead of the more important non-farm payrolls report due on Friday from the Labor Department which will comprise both private and public sector jobs. Economists are expecting non-farm payrolls to have grown by 490,000 for March, versus 678,000 in February. For the ADP report, the projection had been for a growth of 450,000 in March versus February's 475,000.

While what the ADP reported was lower than the previous month's number, the March data still represented "a solid report and continues the run of jobs growth," economist Adam Button said in a post on the ForexLive platform.

The Federal Reserve said earlier this month the labor market was "extremely tight" with robust demand and subdued supply.

US job openings hovered near record highs in February as vacancies continued to outpace hires in a labor market that remained overwhelmingly in favor of workers, the government's monthly Job Openings and Labor Turnover Summary showed on Tuesday.

Joblessness among Americans reached a record high of 14.8% in April 2020, with the loss of some 20 million jobs in the aftermath of the coronavirus breakout. Jobs recovery has, however, been stellar over the past year, with the jobless rate moving down to 3.8% in February. A jobless rate of 4% or below is regarded by the Federal Reserve as maximum employment.

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Pentagon Commits 100 Switchblade Weapon Systems to Ukraine in Recent Package - Official

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The United States will deliver to Ukraine 100 Switchblade aerial weapon systems amid the ongoing Russian special operation in the country, Assistant US Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Celeste Wallander said in a congressional testimony on Wednesday.

"We have committed 100 switchblade tactical unmanned aerial systems to be delivered in the most recent package of presidential drawdown," Wallander told a US House Armed Services Committee hearing.

The Switchblade weapon systems are so-called "loitering munitions" that combine elements of both drones and missiles. The system is launched into the air, where it can fly around using an electric engine before diving and detonating its explosive warhead on the intended target.

The Switchblades were included in the \$800 million US defense package to Ukraine announced by the Biden administration earlier in March.

The package also included 800 anti-aircraft systems, 9,000 anti-armor systems, 7,000 small arms, 800 Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, 1,000 light anti-armor weapons, 2,000 Javelin missiles, 6,000 AT-4 anti-armor systems, and 25,000 sets of body armor and helmets.

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US EUCOM Chief Says Time to Re-Examine NATO's Permanent Architecture in Eastern Europe

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) – Russia's military operation in Ukraine is an opportunity for NATO to re-examine its permanent military architecture in Eastern Europe, US European Command chief Gen. Tod Wolters said on Wednesday.

"It's got to change and certainly this is an opportunity as a result of this senseless act on behalf of Russia to re-examine the permanent military architecture that exists not only in Eastern Europe, but in our air policing activity in aviation, in our standing naval maritime groups," Wolters told a House hearing.

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Biden Launches One-Stop Website for COVID-19 Vaccines, Tests - White House

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has activated a new one-stop official shopping website for COVID-19 vaccines, tests, treatments, masks and medical supplies

to deal with the coronavirus pandemic, the White House announced in a fact sheet on Wednesday.

"[The] website will feature a new test-to-treat locator tool to help people access the over 2,000 locations that offer COVID-19 tests and antiviral pills at one convenient location," the White House said.

The website is designed to help all people in the United States gain better access to lifesaving tools like vaccines, tests, treatments, and masks, as well as get the latest updates on COVID-19 in their area, the White House also said.

"The Administration has worked over the past 14 months to set up over 90,000 vaccination sites, make more than 400 million high-quality masks available for free, send free tests to peoples' homes, and stand up new test-to-treat sites where people can get tested and receive life-saving antivirals all in one place," the White House added.

Biden announced the Test-to-Treat initiative in his State of the Union address earlier this month. Since, the Biden administration has already launched more than 2,000 of them, according to the White House.

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Meta Paying GOP Firm for Campaign to Discredit TikTok - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The Meta company (banned in Russia) is paying a major Republican consulting firm to pit the public against the Chinese-owned TikTok social network, The Washington Post reported on Tuesday.

The company is paying company Targeted Victory to run a nationwide campaign of portraying the fast-growing social network as dangerous to American children and society, the report said, citing internal emails of the consulting firm.

The firm's director allegedly wrote in a letter in February that Targeted Victory needed to "get the message out that while Meta is the current punching bag, TikTok is the real threat, especially as a foreign owned app that is #1 in sharing data that young teens are using."

"Bonus point if we can fit this into a broader message that the current bills/proposals aren't where [state attorneys general] or members of Congress should be focused," a staffer from the firm wrote.

The campaign reportedly involves posting articles in major regional media and promoting stories about supposedly dangerous trends in TikTok, which actually originated on Facebook (banned in Russia).

The effort was also intended to deflect from Meta's privacy and antitrust issues, the newspaper said.

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US, Czech Republic Taking Steps to Reduce Reliance on Russian Energy - Joint Statement

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The United States and Czech Republic are making efforts to reduce their reliance on Russian energy resources by diversifying sources and enhancing collaboration on nuclear power, delegations of the two countries said in a joint statement on Wednesday.

The joint statement was issued immediately after the US-Czech Republic Strategic Dialogue in Prague was held earlier in the day.

"We agree current geopolitical developments make enhancing energy security more urgent than ever," the statement said. "The United States and the Czech Republic are taking steps to reduce reliance on Russian oil, natural gas, and nuclear fuel by diversifying sources of energy, expanding our already strong cooperation on nuclear power, and reducing consumption in line with our shared climate goals."

The US delegation at the Strategic Dialogue meeting was headed by Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried and the Czech delegation by Deputy Foreign Minister Martin Povejsil.

The delegations explained in the joint statement that the Strategic Dialogue comes at a critical time for both countries.

"It demonstrates the strength and importance of the bilateral relationship as the United States and the Czech Republic focus on the security challenges on the Eastern Flank of NATO due to the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine," the statement said. "We underline our commitment to protect and defend every inch of NATO territory."

The Czech Republic has vowed again to increase its defense spending to 2% of GDP, the statement said, adding that a faster pace of modernization of the Czech armed forces is a priority.

"We stand strong and united in support of the people of Ukraine and the Ukrainian government against Russia's unprovoked war, which is causing immense human suffering and destruction of civilian infrastructure," the statement said.

The two countries also called on Russia to cease its special military operation and completely withdraw its armed forces from Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia and to respect their sovereignty and internationally recognized borders.

In addition, the statement voiced the two countries' opinion that China's position on Russia also remains under their close scrutiny.

"The United States and the Czech Republic agree that the international community must deepen Russia's political and economic isolation and apply tougher sanctions against enablers of Russia's aggression," the statement said.

Moreover, the United States and the Czech Republic emphasized the importance of their partnership in addressing common threats and challenges, including in the area of cyber security and resilience to hybrid threats as well as cooperation on a broad range of topics, including closer cooperation with partners in the Indo-Pacific region.

"We also affirm our commitment to deepen support and cooperation with democratic partners in the region and around the world, such as Taiwan," the statement added.

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Biden to Speak With Zelenskyy at 14:45 GMT About Further Support for Ukraine - White House

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will speak with Volodymyr Zelenskyy at 10:45 EDT (14:45 GMT) to discuss "continued support for Ukraine," the White House pool reporters said on Wednesday.

"President Biden will speak with President Zelenskyy of Ukraine today at 10:45 AM EDT to discuss our continued support for Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression," the statement said.

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US Imposes New Sanctions on 1 Individual, 4 Entities in Iran - Treasury

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - The United States is introducing sanctions against one individual and four entities in Iran, the Department of Treasury announced on Wednesday.

"The following individual has been added to OFAC's SDN List: HOSSEINI, Mohammad Ali ... (Linked To: ISLAMIC REVOLUTIONARY GUARD CORPS RESEARCH AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY JEHAD ORGANIZATION; Linked To: PARCHIN CHEMICAL INDUSTRIES)," the statement said.

In addition, Gestar Sanat Delijan company, Pars Banaye Sadr construction company, Sayeh Ban Sepehr Delijan Co and Sina Composite Delijan company were added to the list.

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US Q4 GDP Up 6.9%, Commerce Dept. Says in Final Estimate for Period

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - US Gross Domestic Product grew by 6.9% in the fourth quarter of last year, the Commerce Department said on Wednesday in its final estimate for the quarter which came in lower than its previous reading of 7%.

"Real gross domestic product (GDP) increased at an annual rate of 6.9 percent in the fourth quarter of 2021," the Bureau of Economic Analysis, a unit within the Commerce Department, said in a news release.

The department issues three GDP readings altogether for each quarter.

Economists surveyed by US media had projected a 7.1% reading for the third estimate on the quarter, due to the faster-than-expected growth in inflation since the first estimate.

"While it's a slight miss, it's a reminder that growth was sizzling coming into the year," economist Adam Button said in a post on the ForexLive forum.

After a 3.5% contraction in 2020 GDP forced by the coronavirus crisis, the US economy grew by 5.7% for all of 2021 — the biggest calendar-year growth since 1984.

But inflation has been expanding faster, growing by 5.8% in the year to December, its most since 1982, according to the Consumer Price Index published by the Commerce Department. In February, the annual expansion of the CPI reached 7.9%, the fastest since 1981.